

The Rāmāyaṇa Scenes in the Sculptural Art of India and Indonesia

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The cultural history of Asia could be reconstructed through a systematic study of a particular religious theme popular simultaneously in several countries with local variations. Such a study would reveal intimate contact between the two or even more cultures. The cultural contact of India with the South-east Asian countries since Pre-Christian era is well known and as a consequence the two principal religions Buddhism and Brahmanism, along with Indian myths, legends and fables reached these countries without any mechanical vehicles or transmission and even printed works. The most important of all such South-east Asian countries is Indonesia, known as *dvīpāntara* in ancient times, where the cultural influence of India could be seen right from c. 7th-8th century C.E., the visual manifestations of which are to be seen at the greatest centre of Buddhist Art at Borobudur (c. 8th century C.E.) and the Brahmanical centres at Prambanan (9th-10th century C.E.) and Awatarama (14th-15th century C.E.)¹

The *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, the two great immortal Indian epics, had played significant role in the cultural and religious life of India. Owing to the vitality of both the *Rāmakathā* and *Mahābhārata*, these were assimilated by the Buddhists and the Jainas and consequently independent works were composed dealing with the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* in both sects. These two epics also bewitched and hypnotised the people of other Asian countries with altogether different religious, cultural and literary traditions. Due to the all pervading importance of these epics, they gained high popularity both in literary creations as well as visual manifestations in a number of South-east Asian countries, the most important of them being Indonesia, Cambodia, Burma and Thailand.² Of the two epics, however, *Rāmāyaṇa* was more favoured due to its vitality in portraying such characters as Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Sītā and Bharata who could become ideals for any society. It equally help the imagination of classes of people in Asia ranging from the most sophisticated and affluent to the most humble and lowly.

The earliest representations of *Rāmakathā* in India are found during the Gupta period, the examples of which are to be noticed on the Daśavatāra temple at Deogarh and the Śiva temple at Nachnā.³ These renderings gained more and more favour in

visual manifestations with advance in time in stone sculptures and later in paintings as well. The most important sites of medieval times enriched with depictions of *Rāmakathā* are Pāpanātha and Virūpakṣa temples at Paṭṭadakal (c. 8th century C.E.), Upper Śivālaya at Bādāmī (c.7th century C.E.), Kailasa temple at Ellorā (8th century C.E. Aurangabad, Maharastra), Sun temple at Moḍherā (c. 1026 C.E. Mahesana, Gujarat), Orissan temples spread over in Bhubaneśvara (Śatrughaneśvara and Swarnaajāleśvara temples - 7th century C.E.) and Barambā (Simhanātha temple - c.8th century C.E., Cuttak), the Hoyasala temples in Karnataka at Halebid (Hoyasaleśvara temple, 12th century C.E.), Somanāthapur (Keśava temple - 1268 C.E.) and Amṛtāpur (Amṛteśvara temple - 1196 C.E.) and Vijayanagar temples at Hampī and Kañcī. These temples, datable between 7th and 16th century C.E., depict different episodes from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, starting mostly from the *Aranyakāṇḍa*. However, in few examples from Paṭṭadakal, Amṛtāpur and Somanāthapur episodes from the *Bālakāṇḍa* are also found. It may be remarked that almost all the sites yielding episodes from *Bālakāṇḍa* belong to Karnataka and to Calukya and Hoyasala dynasties ruling one after the other. The rendering of few episodes from the *Bālakāṇḍa* in Indonesian art may be suggestive of the proximity between the prolific site of Prambanan in Indonesia and Paṭṭadakal, Amṛtāpur and Somanāthapur in India.⁴

There appears several versions of *Rāmāyaṇa* in different regional languages of India, the main source of all such versions being Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. These included the famous *Rāmāyaṇa* of Tamil called the Kamban *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Telgu version known as the *Dvīpa Rāmāyaṇa*, the Malayalam version known as the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* and likewise several versions of *Rāmakathā* in Bengali, Assamese, Gujarati, Kashmiri and above all the Hindi version entitled the *Rāmacaritmānas* by Tulasīdāsa (16th century C.E.). However, the *Rāmacaritmānas* assume special importance since it portrays Rāma and all other principal characters in the highest of virtues. The rise of *Vaiṣṇava bhakti* movement in India during the 14th-16th century C.E. gave a further impetus to the *Rāmakathā*.

Although the written versions of *Rāmāyaṇa* in South-east Asia do not go beyond the 9th century C.E., there is sufficient sculptural and inscriptional evidences to prove that the legend was known to the South-east Asian countries atleast by the early years of the Christian era.⁵ We are encountered with innumerable examples both in painting and sculptures pertaining to the *Rāmakathā* spread over in different countries of South-east Asia, particularly Indonesia, Combodia and Thailand. However, Indonesia was

the most important of all such South-east Asian countries which were influenced by the *Rāmakathā* tradition⁶. It has yielded innumerable instances of the rendering of the *Rāmakathā* apparently suggestive the close and amicable cultural relations between India and Indonesia atleast from c. ninth century C.E.

Of all the Indonesian sites yielding *Rāmakathā* panels Parambanan (9th-10th century C.E.) and Panatarana (14th-15th century C.E.), both in Java, are the most important ones in terms of number of episodes and also the variety of forms and mode of their representation. The present paper, however, endeavours to discuss at length the rendering of *Rāmakathā* at Prambanan in a critical manner to gauge the bearing the Indian Tradition and Art along with the native contribution in selecting the episodes, their details and mode of representation.

The magnificent rendering of *Rāmakathā* in Prambanan temple complex of central Java is found mainly on Śiva temple, known as Caṇḍī Loro - Joṅgraṅg, and Brahmā temple. The scenes are carved on the inner side of balustrade of the circumambulatory path (*pradakṣiṇā*) of the temples. It is suggestive of the importance being attached to such episodes and also the uniform mode of their representation forming a separate entity. However, in India the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* scenes are carved mainly on the *narathara* (Hoyasala temples), on the pillars (Moḍherā), on the ceilings (Moḍherā and Nāgdā), on the cornice (Sas temple - Nāgdā, Dadhimati temple - Goṭh Māṅgalod, Simhanātha temple, Barambā), and *pīṭha* (Paṭṭaḍakal, Amṛtāpur, Ellorā - Kailasa temple). The scenes in Prambanan temples run from left to right (observer's standpoint) in accordance with the circumambulation. It is interesting to note that the episodes are represented in traditional sequence on these temples and show a continuity from Śiva to Brahmā temple, a rare feature not to be found anywhere else in India or even in the South-east Asian countries. The Śiva temple exhibits scenes from the *Bālakāṇḍa* i.e. Viṣṇu being requested by the gods to incarnate to kill the demon Rāvaṇa and Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa going with Viśvāmitra to kill the demons like Tātakā, Subāhu and Mārīca to the beginning of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* depicting the *setubandha* episode i.e. the march of the army of Rāvaṇa over the bridge to reach Laṅkā. The scenes further continue on the Brahmā temple starting from the episode showing Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Sugrīva and Viśvāmitra⁷ engaged in strategic talks before attacking Laṅkā and Vibhīṣaṇa, the younger brother of Rāvaṇa appearing before Rāma to express his loyalty after parting with Rāvaṇa. The scene on the Brahmā temple, however, ends

with *Uttarakāṇḍa* showing detailed rendering of Lava - Kuśa episode. Thus the two temples impart a sense of oneness through the rendering of *Rāmakathā*.

Further, the rendering of Vaiṣṇava themes on Śiva and Brahmā temples is also of consequence suggesting a syncretic aspect and also the amicable relationship among the worshippers of Brahmanical trinity in Indonesia during those ancient times. The cult and so also the temples of Brahmā were popular in Indonesia which is evident from the popularity of *tripuruṣa prāsāda* dedicated respectively to Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. The picture in India is vice-versa where Brahmā temples are rarely known because independent cult of Brahmā could never rise. Hence the rendering of *Rāmakathā* on Brahmā temple is also a unique feature. It may also be remarked in passing that like Prambanan in India as well the *Rāmakathā* scenes are mostly carved on Śiva temples, which was indeed a welcome trend suggestive of the sectarian amity.⁸

The *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes in Prambanan undoubtedly represents one of the best examples wherein almost all the important episodes have been selected for depiction and that too in a most vivid and telling manner. These episodes cover the entire *Rāmāyaṇa* starting from the *Bālakāṇḍa* to *Uttarakāṇḍa*. The episodes from *Bālakāṇḍa* are few as compared to Indian examples but the episodes of *Uttarakāṇḍa* particularly the Lava-Kuśa episode have been shown in a most exhaustive manner which on the other hand are rarely found in Indian art, the examples of which are known only from the Hoyasala temples and the Sun temple at Moḍherā. In India the *Rāmakathā* depictions usually ends with the killing of *Rāvaṇa* and at the most return of Rāma - Sītā - Lakṣmaṇa to Ayodhyā and Rāma's coronation. It appears that the *ācāryas*, and the artists in India deliberately dropped the depiction of Lava-Kuśa episode because they thought that it would blemish the virtuous character of Rāma while in Indonesia the artist was not working with any such dogma and hence he could remain impartial observer.

The Lava-Kuśa episodes carved on Brahmā temple start from the exile of Sītā in her pregnancy and consequent birth of twin babies known as Lava-Kuśa and their childhood in the hermitage of sage Vālmīki and ends with the appearance of Lava and Kuśa in the court of Rāma, the deep remorse of Rāma and consequent accession of Lava and Kuśa to the throne of Ayodhyā. The entire episode is represented by as many as 15 panels, the largest for any single episode in the Prambanan temple complex⁹. The episodes namely the slaying of Mārīca and abduction of Sītā and meeting of Rāma - Lakṣmaṇa with Hanumān and Sugrīva, Vāli-Sugrīva combat and the killing of Vāli by Rāma are also given the detailed treatment which were the most popular episodes

of *Rāmakathā* in Indian context, the examples of which are found on almost all the important temples yielding *Rāmakathā* right from the Gupta period. The most important of such examples are found from the Sun temple at Moḍherā, Simhanātha temple at Barambā, the Kailash temple at Ellorā, Pāpanātha and Virūpākṣa temples at Paṭṭadakal and temples at Halebid, Amṛtāpur and Somanāthapur.

The other popular episodes in Prambanan temple include Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa going with Viśwāmitra and killing demoness Tāṭakā and other demons, the marriage of Rāma, award of punishment to Sūrpaṇakhā, Hanumān reaching *Aśoka-Vāṭikā* after crossing the ocean to meet Sītā and his return to Rāma after burning Laṅkā-*dahana*), the construction of the bridge over ocean and the march of the army of Rāma to Laṅkā, the deep sleep and awakening of Kumbhakarṇa, the fight of Indrajit, Kumbhakarṇa, Rāvaṇa and his army with Rāma and the death of Rāvaṇa and the return of Rāma to Ayodhyā and accession to throne of Ayodhyā. It may be noted that more or less all the episodes find depiction in Indian temples as well. Thus the thematic selection from *Rāmakathā*, barring a single episode of Lava and Kuśa, shows a harmony between Indian and Indonesian visual manifestations.

However, the *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes in Prambanan follow mostly the earliest version of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* but at the same time show departure which was mainly due to the impact of Kākwin *Rāmāyaṇa* contemporaneous almost with the Prambanan reliefs. The Kākwin *Rāmāyaṇa* mostly bear the influence of the Tamil version of Kamban *Rāmāyaṇa* and Bhavabhūti's *Uttararāmacarita*.¹⁰ The Javanese tradition refers to only two wives namely Kauśalyā and Kaikeyī of Daśaratha. The other points of departure are : Rāvaṇa is not portrayed as adorer of Śiva and is called mainly by his youth name *Daśamukha* which is a secondary name of Rāvaṇa in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*; Sītā being mentioned as the daughter of Rāvaṇa; mention of two deer in place of one in the episode of the slaying of Mārīca; the dropping of tears of Sugrīva in the quiver of Lakṣmaṇa and consequently leading to the meeting of Rāma with Sugrīva.

Before discussing the features of the *Rāmakathā* panels in Prambanan temples and making their comparison with Indian renderings, it is worthwhile to allude to the rare episodes in Prambanan which are not found in Indian temples. Of these, the mention may particularly be made of the scenes wherein different deities are depicted as requesting Viṣṇu lying on *śeṣaśayyā* to incarnate to kill the demon Rāvaṇa, the coronation of Bharata, the slaying of Virādha by Rāma, Hanumān appearing before Rāma after returning from Laṅkā and giving the ornaments of Sītā to Rāma, the funeral

of Daśaratha and Rāvaṇa, the chain-arrow in the shape of a snake (*nāgapāsā*) discharged by Indrajit to bind Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, and the death of Sītā before meeting Rāma. Kabandha in Prambanan depiction is shown with head and an additional face on the stomach resembling that of the Gaṇas frequently depicted in Indian art from Gupta period onwards.¹¹ The absence of some of the important scenes in Prambanan examples is also worth referring which include Lakṣmaṇa-*mūrchā*, the performance of *putreṣṭiyajña* by Daśaratha for obtaining sons, and the scene of childhood of Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata and Śatrughna.

The *Rāmakathā* scenes in Prambanan temples have certain features which may be termed as native or Indonesian character in respect of dress, ornaments and bodily features of the figures and details and treatment of different episodes. The Prambanan *Rāmāyaṇa* relief panels appearing as an integrated part of the architectural scheme are carved in varying dimensions of large and small panels wherein the episodes although running in proper traditional sequence overlap one above the other, suggesting a lively continuity. The scenes are carved into well proportioned stone bands or panels which engirdled the high base of the elevated body of the sculpture with a balcony like projection, suggestive of their individuality and importance.

The figures, neatly set into symmetrically distributed chambers, are elegant, ornate and above all full of life and vigorous movement. The slender and tall figures with freer movement distinctly reveal Pallava and Chola influence but the ornaments, oval faces with somewhat muscular treatment of the body, beard, moustaches and also the manner in which the narrative moves forward are Indonesian in character.¹² The invariable feature of such depiction is the rich landscape and sylvan background mixed with the rendering of birds and animals to create a natural background which was particularly in concurrence with the *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes relating to different incidents like abduction of Sītā, Vāli - Sugrīva fight, Lava - Kuśa episode occurring in the back drop of the nature. Thus the realistic background provided by the Prambanan artist reminds us of alike depictions to be found in Śuṅga art at Bharhut and Sāñcī and consequently followed to some extent in Pallava art as well. The presence of two birds facing each-other over the balconied projections is of particular interest imparting an impression of story telling.

The *Rāmakathā* begins with the figure of Viṣṇu reclining on *śeṣaśayyā* and being prayed by the gods to kill the demon Rāvaṇa and it is perhaps in this background that Rāma in all the Prambanan scenes is represented as an incarnation of Viṣṇu, and not as a human being. As a result, contrary to the *Rāmakathā* depiction in India, Rāma and so also

Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā are always shown not only as wearing *mukūṭa* and other ornaments but are also endowed with halo. Surprisingly, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa do not show *channavīra*, an indispensable feature in Indian context. Further, the accompaniment of retinues with Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā while in exile is also to be noted. The marked emphasis on the fighting scenes between either the two armies or the two main characters of the epic is noteworthy which remind us of the alike scenes on the Dadhimatis, temple, Goṭh Māṅglod (Nagaur, Rajasthan - 9th-10th century C.E.) and Amṛteśvara temple at Amṛtāpur in India.¹³ Rāma mostly stands in the attitude of discharging an arrow (*śarasandhāna*) wherein the attitude appears more like a dancing posture reminding at once of Cola Naṭeśa figures and consequent examples of *Rāmakatha* in Hoyasala temples. Lakṣmaṇa standing nearly in all such instances stands calm and quiet.

The Prambanan artist has wonderfully intermingled different shades of contemporary life with the *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes wherein very often dancing, humourous and other scenes intervene the two *Rāmāyaṇa* scenes. The legendary episode of Kumbhakarna has beautifully been depicted showing elephant, horse and drum-beaters around the figure of Kumbhakarna lying in deep sleep. All these figures are making vigorous efforts and thunderous noise to awaken Kumbhakarna. Almost identical scenes of the awakening of Kumbhakarna are found in the Sās temple, Nāgdā and the Amṛteśvara temple, Amṛtāpur. Vibhīṣaṇa, holding a trident, has always been depicted as the worshipper of Śiva. Likewise the rendering of two demon figures in the episode of their killing, suggest the two stages, making the episode more communicative. In the episode of *Mārīca-vadha* as found in India the demon is not shown as emanating from the head of the deer. The Prambanan reliefs, however, show the demon in a giant human form by the side of deer. These are only some of the features which, however, point to the individuality of the Prambanan reliefs.

References

1. For details consult, A.K.Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, London, 1927; A.J.Bernet Kempers, *Ancient Indonesian Art*, Massachusetts, 1959; H.H.Sarkar, *Cultural Relations between India and South-east Asian Countries*, New Delhi, 1985.
2. H.B.Sarkar, *Rāmāyaṇa in Greater India*, 1975; *The Rāmāyaṇa in South-east Asia : A General Survey*, *Asian Variations in Rāmāyaṇa* (Ed. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar, Madras, 1983, pp. 206-20; Zean Filliozat, *The Rāmāyaṇa in South-east Asian Sanskrit, Epigraphy and Iconography*, *Asian Variations in Rāmāyaṇa* (Ed. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar), pp. 192-205; Kapila Vatsyayan, *Rāmāyaṇa in the Arts of Asia*, *The Rāmāyaṇa Tradition in Aisa* (Ed. V.Raghavan), New Delhi, 1980; pp. 689-702.
3. Besides Nālandā, Bhītargāoñ and Apsad also have yielded *Rāmakathā* panels.

4. Kamal Giri, Rāmāyaṇa Scenes in the Sun Temple at Modherā, *Bhāratī*, Bulletin of the Department of Ancient Indian History Culture and Archaeology, New Series, No. 2, Varanasi, 1984, pp. 71-77; Kamal Giri and Maruti Nandan Pd. Tiwari, Narratives from Bālakāṇḍa in Hoyasala Temples, *Bulletin of Museums and Archaeology in U.P.*, No. 37, June 1986, pp. 3-9.
5. The names like Ravana, Langka, Ayuddha, Bharata, Rama, Laghava, Sita, Vali and Laksmana in dated inscriptions indicate the knowledge of heroes and heroines and place names of *Rāmāyaṇa* in Indonesia in 9th-10th century C.E. The above reference proves that in the second half of 9th century C.E. there was an oral version, now lost, of Rāma saga. B.B.Sarkar, *Corpus of the Inscriptions of Java*, VI. I & II, No. 20, 25, 40, 46, 70, 80, 96.
6. Willem Stutterheim, *Rama Legends and Rama Reliefs in Indonesia* (Tr. by C.D. Paliwal and Ed. by Lokesh Chandra), New Delhi, 1987.
7. The rendering of a bearded and saintly figure identified as Viśwāmītra in the episodes following *setubandha* is surprising. Viśwāmītra sitting in the midst of Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Sugrīva and others, either holding strategic talks or departing to the battlefield, is a peculiar feature to be noticed in Prambanan only. However, Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* or any other version of *Rāmākathā* do not refer to the accompaniment of Viśwāmītra to Laṅkā.
Cf. Kaelan, *A short Guide to the Lara Djoṅgrang Temple Group* as quoted by Lokesh Chandra in his preface to Willem Stutterheim's, *Rama Legends and Rama - Reliefs in Indonesia*.
8. Besides a few Viṣṇu temples namely, Daśavatāra temple at Deogarh, Lakṣmaṇa temple at Khajurāho, Hoasaleśvara temple at Halebid, Keśava temple at Somanāthapur and few others, the most vigorous rendering of *Rāmākathā* is found on Śiva temples namely, Pāpanātha and Virūpākṣa temples at Paṭṭadakal, Kailāsa temple at Ellorā, Amṛtesvara temple at Amṛtapur, Simhanātha temple at Barambā, Dadhimati temple at Goṭh Māṅglod (Nagaur, Rajasthan), Sās temple, Nāgdā (Udaipur, Rajasthan) and others.
9. As contrary to Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sītā in Prambanan depiction dies in the hermitage without meeting Rāma and Lava-Kuśa reach Ayodhyā at the time of *aśvamedh* celebration only after the death of Sītā. Thus the Prambanan distinctly show departure from Indian tradition. For details consult Willem Stutterheim, *op.cit.*, (Preface by Lokesh Chandra, pp. 16-17).
10. Camile Bulke, *Rāmākathā*, Prayag, 1971.
11. Although Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* refers to the prayer of deities before Viṣṇu to kill Rāvaṇa and demons like Virādha and Kabandha by Rāma but their depictions are not found in Indian art. The Indian works describe Kabandha as headless.
12. The comparison of *Rāmāyaṇa* themes in Panatarana and Vijayanagar temples distinctly reveals autochthonous character of the traditions of the two countries.
13. It may be observed that the depiction of the *Rāmākathā* deal mainly with the heroic deeds of Rāma.
14. Devangana Desai, 'Narration of the *Rāmāyaṇa* Episode - Vāli-vadha in Indian Sculpture', *Indian Studies - Prof. Niharranjan Ray commemoration Vol.*, New Delhi, 1984, pp. 77-89.